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NAFA Fleet Executive

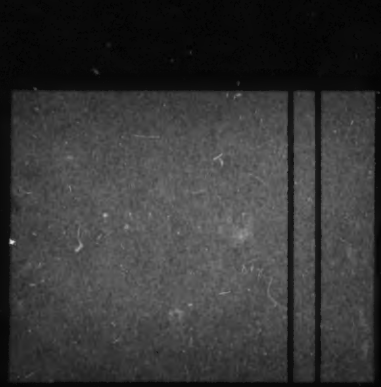
The Magazine for Vehicle Management

September 1987

ANNUAL SAFETY ISSUE

The Profit in Fleet Safety

An In-depth Look at Human and Monetary Preservation



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Official Monthly Publication of
The National Association of Fleet Administrators, Inc.
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Cover design by: Cindi Samol

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Transport Canada Part I:

Working To Reduce Impaired Driving

The effects of drunk driving are obvious: lost, handicapped and maimed lives, millions of dollars in hospital and rehabilitation expenses, millions of dollars in repair costs, and still more money in lost salaries, retraining and compensation costs.

How can fleet managers help lessen the abundance of drunk drivers and are the effects of some of their attempts being felt already?

Jean Wilson, Head of Social Research at Transport Canada, answers these questions and will show you with hard facts and figures that, in fact, progress is being made in the United States and Canada.

Impaired driving refers to the act of driving with a blood-alcohol level greater than that prescribed by law. In Canada, this level is .08 percent blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) or 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 milliliters of blood. In most U.S. states illegal BAC is .10 percent. In the U.S. behavioral impairment may occur at levels lower than these, and there are laws to cover such instances.

There are a number of ways in which one can measure the extent of the impaired driving problem, none of them completely satisfactory. Some would argue the ultimate measure is alcohol-related crashes. The closest measure available is derived from the results of blood-alcohol tests performed on drivers killed in crashes. In the U.S., data are reported from only 15 states which routinely test fatally injured drivers for the presence of alcohol.

Chart I shows U.S. data from 1980 through 1984. The lower bar is the percent of dead drivers with illegal blood-alcohol levels and the upper bar is the percent of drivers with any amount of alcohol in their bodies. The main feature to note is the percent of illegal alcohol involvement in fatal crashes is alarmingly high by any standard — between 40 and 50 percent!

Furthermore, drinking drivers who get killed have usually been drinking excessive amounts. Those with BAC less than .10 percent (the upper portion of the bar) represent the minority of drinking drivers killed. However, on the positive side, there appears to be a decreasing trend from 1981 to 1984. The trend continues for 1985 (not shown on the graph) as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports 38.3 percent of drivers killed that year in the United States had a BAC exceeding .10 percent. (Note: 1985 data is not strictly comparable with other years because NHTSA changed their methodology, bringing in

accident reports from all 50 states.) Canada's figures (shown on Chart II) show a similar trend from 1974 to 1985.

From 1974 to 1981 there is no apparent trend, either upward or downward, with illegal alcohol involvement hovering around 60 percent. Then from 1982, there is a gradual decline.

Unwarranted Conclusions

Does this mean recent initiatives to reduce impaired driving are beginning to have an impact? Although it would be nice to think so, such a conclusion is not warranted from these data alone. There are other ways of measuring the impaired driving problem which indicate how it may be changing.

Chart III shows the number of persons charged with impaired driving offenses in Canada. There has been a decrease from approximately 162,000 in 1981 to 132,000 in 1985, a trend which, on the surface, is consistent with the trend in alcohol-related fatalities. However, one should be wary when interpreting police enforcement statistics; they do not necessarily vary with the extent of the crime. They can be very sensitive to other factors, such as police resources, priorities and enforcement practices.

For example, when the Stockton, California police department was given special program funds to selectively enforce impaired driving laws the number of charges laid increased 200 percent.

It is of some interest that U.S. figures for DWI arrests over the same 1981-1985 timeframe do not follow the same pattern as the Canadian data. (See Chart IV) The number of arrests increased from 1981 to 1983 then dropped in 1984 and 1985. These numbers represent only those police forces reporting to the FBI (approximately 4,000) but they are fairly representative of national trends.

Economy Affects Sales

Two commodities whose sales are highly sensitive to economic conditions are gasoline and beverage alcohol. We know for certain that sales of alcoholic beverages have leveled off over the past five years. The figures in Chart V show total volume of beer sales and per capita beer sales in the U.S. and Canada. (Beer was chosen over total alcohol sales because studies show beer is the preferred beverage of the majority of impaired drivers.)

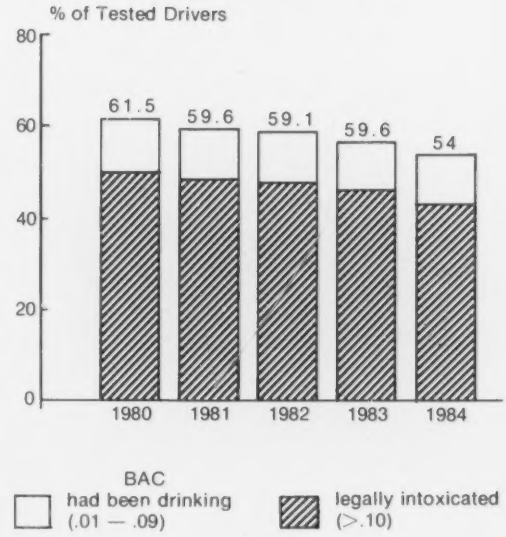
In the U.S., per capita beer sales peaked in 1981 and have declined since, but the pattern in Canada is different, where per capita beer sales have been falling since 1976. There are also more year-to-year fluctuations in Canada, possibly since sales were affected by labor disputes in the brewing and beer retail sectors. In any case, the pattern since 1981 is clear: declining beer consumption has little relation to the number of alcohol-related deaths.

Perhaps the best indication of whether the extent of impaired driving has changed over time comes from night-time roadside surveys of drivers'

(Continued on page 18)

Chart I

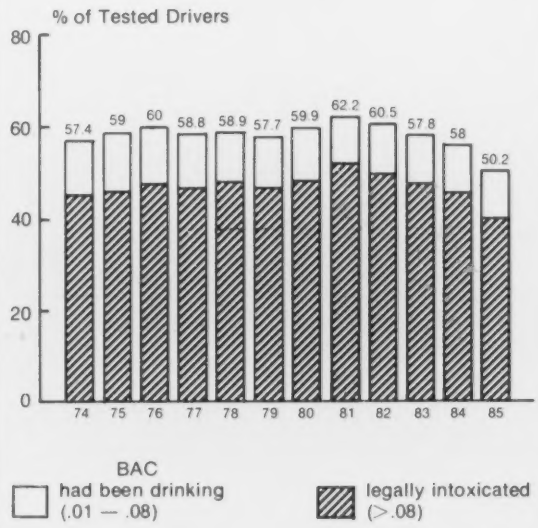
Alcohol Involvement Among Fatally Injured Drivers: U.S.A. (15 States). 1980-1984



Source: Fatal Accident Reporting System. 1984. U.S. Department of Transportation

Chart II

Alcohol Involvement Among Fatally Injured Drivers: Canada (7 Provinces). 1974-1985



Source: T.I.R.F. Fatality Database

Chart V

Volume of Beer Sales. Canada. 1976-1985

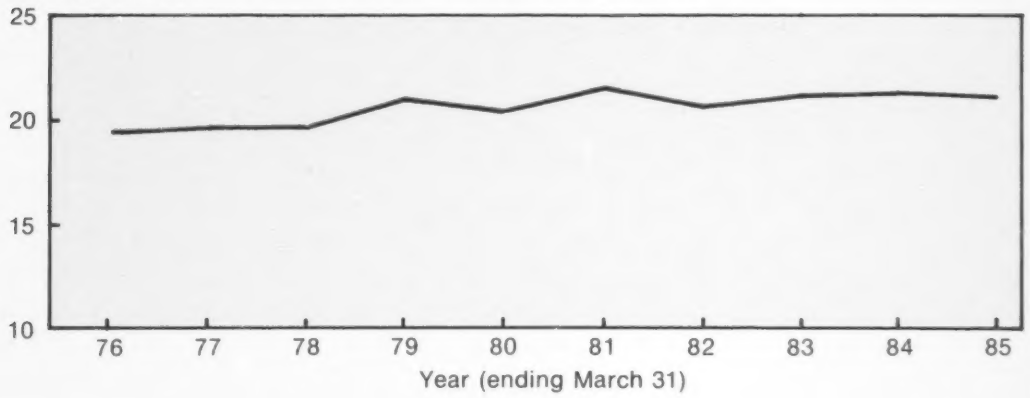
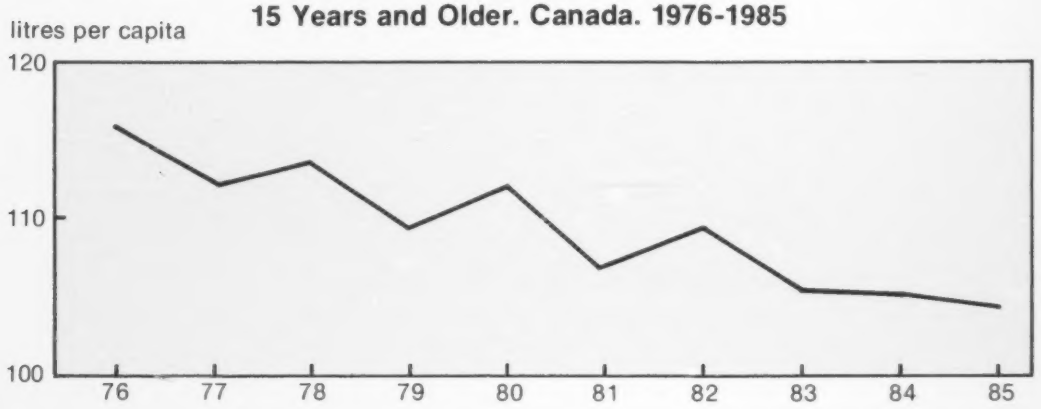


Chart V

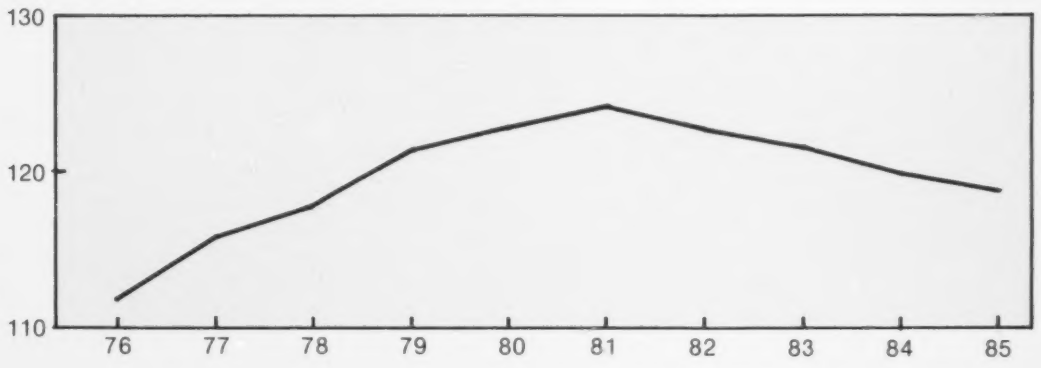
Volume of Beer Sales Per Capita
15 Years and Older. Canada. 1976-1985



Source: Statistics Canada. 1986

Chart V

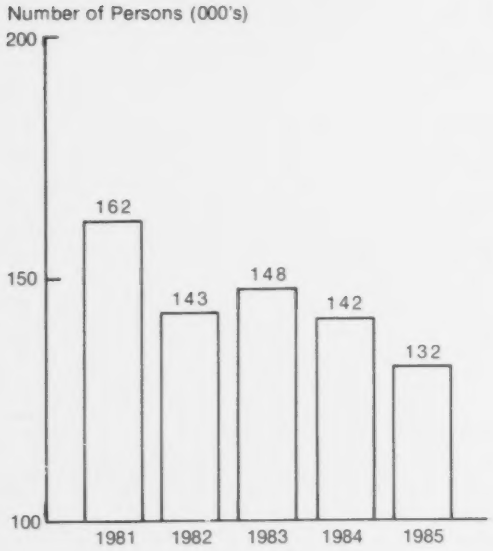
Volume of Beer Sales Per Capita
16 Years and Older. U.S.A. 1976-1985



Source: Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce. 1985

Chart III

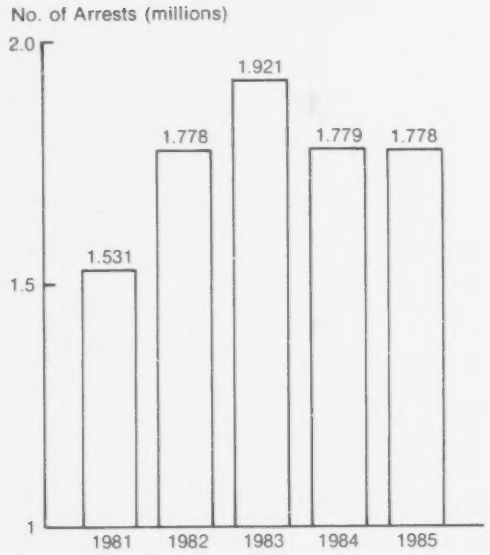
Number of Persons Charged with Impaired Driving Offenses: Canada. 1981-1985



Source: Juristat 6 (3), 1986. Statistics Canada

Chart IV

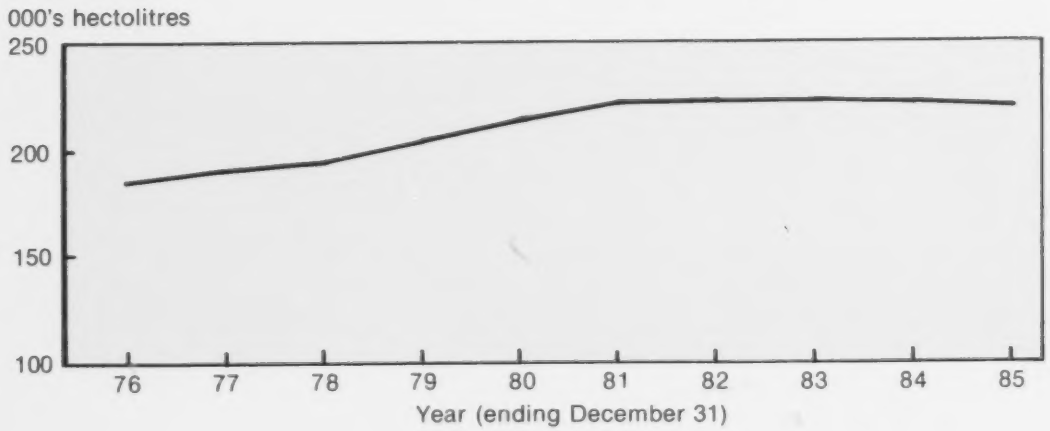
Number of DWI Arrests U.S.A., 1981-1985



Source: F.B.I., 1986 (including only police forces reporting to the F.B.I.)

Chart V

Volume of Beer Sales. U.S.A. 1976-1985



(Continued from page 15)

alcohol use. In Canada, drivers are randomly stopped and asked to provide a voluntary breath sample with no legal consequences. Surveys conducted in 1981 indicate between the hours of 10 p m. and 3 a.m. about six percent of drivers on the road were legally impaired. Preliminary results from surveys conducted in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in 1986 show the extent of impaired driving has probably decreased, but the results are as yet unofficial.

Roadside Reductions

Similar types of surveys have also been conducted in the United States. A national roadside survey in 1986 indicated a 37 percent reduction in the number of drivers with BAC over .10 percent since 1973. This is probably the most direct evidence available showing impaired driving has, in fact, been declining.

Does this mean we are on the way to solving the impaired driving problem? It has been suggested we have grounds for tempered optimism, but not complacency. Although small improvements are evident, the problem is still alarmingly big as evidenced by the fact that about 40 percent of driver fatalities are legally impaired; approximately one in ten drivers on the roads between 1:30 a.m. and 3 a.m. is legally impaired. Furthermore, the reasons for the apparent change of direction in impaired driving is not known. If economic factors are primarily responsible, one would expect alcohol consumption and impaired driving to return to pre-1982 levels with economic recovery.

Changing Attitudes

On the positive side, during the past five years there appears to have been something akin to a social revolution taking place with respect to drinking and driving. It is quite possible the vast spectrum of society's response to the problem has had an impact on changing peoples' attitudes and behavior.

Some approaches forming part of this recent social trend are:

1) Legislative. One of the most visible social trends has been a general tendency of many jurisdictions to toughen their impaired driving laws. In Canada, major amendments were introduced to the Criminal Code with the passage of Bill-C-19 in December 1985, and a number of provincial governments have increased the period of license suspension. Most states have introduced recent changes to drink-driving laws, partly in response to federal government pressure, in the form of incentive grants. Some states have become almost competitive with each other, claiming that their respective impaired driving laws are the toughest in the country. Legislative trends include increases in legal drinking age, increased penalties, jail sentence for first offense, mandatory assessment and treatment for alcohol dependency and closing of loop-holes in the judicial system.

2) Enforcement. If legislative strategies are to be effective, they must be accompanied by enthusiastic enforcement. Studies have repeatedly shown that a tough new law may have a temporary deterrent effect, but if people realize there has been no change in the actual likelihood of their being caught, impaired driving soon returns to its former (pre-law) level.

Impaired driving law enforcement often takes the form of blitzes or short-term campaigns, characterized by random spot checks or sobriety check points. These have been practiced for some time by several Canadian provinces and are gaining popularity in the U.S., as states seem to be finding ways to overcome constitutional objections to the procedure. Oddly enough, these spot checks do not usually result in large numbers of arrests. Their primary goal is deterrence, not detection. However, when well-publicized, they have been shown to result in short-term decreases in alcohol-related accidents.

3) Citizen Action Groups. Citizen Action Groups have been a major influence on awareness of the problem of impaired driving. Among the membership of these groups are relatives and close friends of impaired driving accident victims — people who have very strong feelings and motivations. These groups have brought sufficient pressure on governments, either directly or through the media, to influence them to change their impaired driving laws.

4) Theme of Shared Social Responsibility. This theme is reflected in slogans, such as "friends don't let friends drive drunk," which form a basis of some publicity campaigns. It is reflected in approaches like Server Intervention programs in which employees in the retail alcohol beverage industry are given training to recognize signs of intoxication and taught the skills to deal with such cases. Peer intervention programs have been introduced in a number of high schools. Designated Driver, Dial-a-ride type services and responsible hosting are other examples. The trend is also reflected in the increasing number of civil liability suits naming the server of alcoholic beverages as a contributing party to a motor vehicle accident. The notion that each of us is our brother's keeper may be objectional to some, especially when taken to the extreme. However, the major thrust behind most public awareness programs is the recognition that the problem is too big to be solved by legislative and enforcement approaches alone. There is an assumption that the problem extends beyond the direct perpetrators of the crime and that all of us have a role to play in reducing impaired driving and its tragic consequences. ■